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Communist  
Penetration

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 March 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviets and Black Africa: New Approaches  
and the African Response

SUMMARY

The decline of prospects for Communist-oriented radicalism in Africa has apparently led Moscow to some shifts of emphasis in its approach to black Africa. Moscow now seems unwilling to depend so heavily on such allies as Nkrumah, and may have moved Africa somewhat farther down on its order of priorities. New tactics include a more extensive diplomatic presence and some new aid and training overtures to the African military elite. The new Soviet approach to Africa is more varied than the old, but still contains inherent contradictions. Though the USSR now portrays itself as a respectable and friendly great power, it has not abandoned its cultivation of assets for political subversion.

The African elite tends to view Soviet ideology as irrelevant, and is still culturally attuned to the West. Moreover, this elite, though eager for aid from the USSR or any other source, is growing more nationalistic and suspicious of foreigners. Even if new leftist leaders emerge, as seems likely, we doubt that the Soviets will find them easy to influence or control.

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From the Soviet Angle

1. After a decade of grappling with the problems of black Africa, the USSR is still casting about for an effective approach to the African elite. A good deal of the Soviet investment in black Africa went down the drain with the sudden overturn of friendly regimes in Ghana and Mali. The Soviets, despite prolonged cultivation of these governments through economic and military aid, cultural exchanges, scholarships, and political tutelage, had made no permanent impact and had failed to create a substantial cadre of pro-Moscow devotees.

2. One result of these coups seemed to be a realization in Moscow that the Soviets still did not understand the Africans. Soviet African experts appear unsure of how to apply Marxism-Leninism to African societies and recognize that "revolutionary-democratic" single-party states in black Africa are likely to be unstable even with Soviet support. Clearly the Soviets are still feeling their way, and their new tactics in Africa reflect a greater degree of flexibility and caution.

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3. Apparently in an effort to learn more about the Africans and to expand contacts with them, the Soviets are building up the staffs of their black African embassies, even in insignificant countries. For example, the Soviet embassies in Sierra Leone, Dahomey, and Cameroon each have over 20 accredited diplomatic personnel, as well as the usual complement of wives, chauffeurs, and janitors. They are demonstrating their willingness to deal amicably with regimes currently in power, regardless of their political leanings. Thus they are working with Chad's Tombalbaye and Senegal's Senghor, who are among the most conservative African statesmen. The Soviets have also expanded their already generous scholarship and travel programs. They are using less arm twisting and fewer subversive schemes than in past years and are portraying themselves as a respectable, benevolent great power. Their policies have not, however, changed so much as to eliminate the conflict between open diplomacy and subversion.

4. Moscow is currently stressing military aid and training as a convenient and inexpensive way to increase its influence in black Africa. The USSR has always been less concerned than the Western powers about arms build-ups in

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Africa and, indeed, has exploited Western reluctance to meet some of the more extravagant African arms requests. In recent years, the Soviets have provided substantial military aid to Nigeria and Somalia. Moreover, they apparently encourage requests in both countries for additional aid. In addition, the Soviets have offered military aid to Congo (Kinshasa) and Ethiopia, key countries now largely dependent on US support but uncertain of future US policies. In each case, Moscow is demonstrating its willingness to deal with relatively pro-Western regimes that have shown little interest in following the "non-capitalist road to development". Each has something of interest to the Soviets: Nigeria, Congo (Kinshasa), and Ethiopia their size and potential wealth, Somalia its long Indian Ocean coastline and its suitability for utilization by Soviet space scientists.

5. In addition to government-to-government activities, the Soviets are trying to establish personal contacts with the military elite in black African states. This makes some sense in view of the current vogue of military coups, which have thrust African officers into a dozen or so presidential palaces. During 1968, about 500 Soviet military technicians served in black Africa, 250 in Somalia alone. A Soviet

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military attache (the second in black Africa) has recently been assigned to Nigeria. Moreover, approximately 1,000 black Africans are receiving military training in the USSR. Of course, Moscow still has a long way to go to match the influence of the former metropoles on the African military elite, but it is clearly trying.

6. On the other hand, the Soviets have been much less forthcoming on requests for additional economic assistance in the last few years.\* The Soviets have stopped offering massive lines of credit and have been much more careful about committing funds, even to apparently feasible projects. Like many Western creditors, they have had trouble collecting on their debts. They do not want to spend money on projects with uncertain political benefits. In Nigeria, for example, despite signing an agreement for economic cooperation last November, the Soviets have yet to come through with any significant commitments. This stands in sharp contrast to the speed with which the Soviets responded to Nigeria's request to buy arms.

\*In 1965, the USSR extended to black Africa credits and grants worth over \$50 million; in 1968, it furnished just over \$5 million.

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From the African Angle

7. The Soviet presence is a recent phenomenon in black Africa. The African elite, Western oriented by tradition and training, tend to look upon the Soviets as strangers with unfamiliar habits and language. To some extent this is an advantage, for those fed up with the colonial influence and receptive to some radical ideas find the Soviets a fresh, promising alternative to the West. The Soviets, quick to take advantage of this reaction, cultivate the restless ones in labor unions, civil service, the army, and elsewhere. Young, impressionable types are offered scholarships; older ones are given trips to the USSR.

8. It is still too early to tell if Moscow is getting its money's worth out of the 5,000 or so black African students currently on scholarship in the USSR. But it is worth noting that the Soviets tend to accept students with low academic qualifications, many of whom cannot make the grade. Some are pulled aside for political indoctrination, but few who have already returned to their home countries appear to have been converted to the Communist cause. Though impressed with some of the visible accomplishments of socialism,

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many students are critical of the racial prejudice and restrictions they meet in Soviet society and resent spending a year or two learning a language virtually useless to them back home. Moreover, they are not usually as well trained to pursue their vocations (mostly the civil service) as those educated in the Western tradition. Often, e.g., in Kenya and Ghana, students returning from the USSR have had a difficult time finding jobs because prospective employers are suspicious of their Soviet connections and unimpressed with their qualifications, especially in technical fields.

9. In those countries where Soviet influence has been significant in the past, few of the elite apparently turned to the USSR for ideological inspiration. They did, however, accept the material benefits of Soviet interest, and professed enough attachment to the socialist cause to keep the aid coming. So far as we can tell, such elaborate, Soviet-sponsored institutions as the Kwame Nkrumah Institute of Economics and Political Science in Ghana, the Higher Party School in Mali, and the Polytechnic Institute in Guinea failed utterly to produce a crop of ideologically committed African communists. The largely foreign faculties had trouble

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communicating with the students and tended to quarrel among themselves about ideological definitions. Similar problems hindered the ambitious joint Soviet-Ghanaian apparatus for conducting clandestine operations out of Ghana against other African countries. Moreover, the Soviets, by close association with the governments of Ghana and Mali, had placed themselves in an exposed position. The Soviets were blamed as well as the overthrown leaders for the mess left behind. Consequently the disappearance of these governments brought a considerable drop in Soviet influence and prestige.

10. Even where regimes courted by the USSR are still in power -- Guinea and Tanzania -- the Soviets have found little gratitude for their investments and are unable to match the Communist Chinese in providing ideological inspiration. The local elite tend to ask what the Soviets have done for them lately. We see little to suggest that Sekou Toure still seeks comfort and guidance from the USSR, though his speeches are full of Marxist slogans and his state and party institutions are still based on the Soviet model. Apparently he has not overcome his enduring suspicion of the Soviets, who once tried to subvert teachers in his own party. Nyerere, unhappy with Soviet military training programs, Soviet

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failure to provide economic aid on easy terms, and Soviet initiatives in Czechoslovakia and Nigeria, has turned out to be an especially unreliable friend. Moreover, he suspects Moscow of encouraging his exiled political rival, Oscar Kambona. Both Toure and Nyerere, currently impressed by the Communist Chinese rhetoric, are devising methods of bringing the inert mass of peasantry into the political mainstream and in the process have borrowed slogans from the Chinese cultural revolution.

11. Most black African leaders remain suspicious of all big powers, and some are developing distinctly xenophobic tendencies. A few Western oriented states, such as Togo and Niger, while wanting the economic benefits of Soviet aid, are especially wary of Communist subversion. Several have objected to the size of the Soviet diplomatic missions in their countries. Ghana went so far as to seize two Soviet fishing trawlers on charges that the ships had intruded into territorial waters and their crews were meddling in internal affairs. Ghanaians claimed that the crews were plotting to restore Nkrumah and detained them for several months despite mounting protests from the Soviet government.

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The Outlook

12. Nationalism is likely to remain the dominant theme in African politics as in African attitudes toward the outside world. In so far as the African elite will be susceptible to foreign influence, we think they will probably remain culturally attuned to the West and not very attracted to or influenced by Soviet ideology. Though willing to accept aid from anyone, the elite will not be of much service to Moscow unless they become much more disillusioned with the West than they are today. Any further deterioration in African relations with the West will improve Soviet opportunities to extend their influence. For example, the Soviets are winning friends among Nigerian civil servants by offering more support to the war effort than the West, and have convinced some influential Nigerians that Westerners simply cannot help being neo-colonialist.

13. Current Soviet aid policies will probably not win the USSR many new friends among the African elite. The cutbacks in economic aid will be resented, especially in those countries to which it has been of major importance in the past. Soviet scholarship programs seem unlikely to gain

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suddenly the relevance they have lacked for the last ten years.

On the other hand, Moscow may have better luck finding support among the young military elite because of the stepped-up military aid and training efforts. In an age when military coups seem inevitable, the Soviets may see some friends take power, if only for a short time.

14. In addition to these efforts, the Soviets will probably continue to support some clandestine organizations even in those countries, such as Ethiopia, where they are trying to improve relations with the government. Similarly, they will likely persist in supporting individuals, whom they believe to be ideologically sympathetic, even when these men are in the ranks of the local opposition. This, however, is a risky business. In gambling that such clandestine support will produce friendlier governments, Moscow would risk alienating leaders it has been wooing.

15. Should new African radicals come to power over the next few years, with or without Soviet clandestine support, Moscow would be tempted to claim that "revolutionary-democratic" leaders, despite temporary reversals, were back

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for good. But the Soviet tendency to rely too heavily on such types is likely to prove as embarrassing in the future as it has in the past, largely because black African nationalism is growing along with xenophobia. Once in office, African leftists tend to be more African than leftist. Such radicals would not necessarily be very susceptible to Soviet guidance or even follow policies pleasing to the USSR. Much depends on whether or not the Soviets learn to accept Africans as they are and stop trying to squeeze them into a Marxist-Leninist mold.

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